Marijuana does not substantially harm thinking skills of long-term recreational users, according to researchers at the University of California San Diego.

They analyzed 15 previously published research studies, and the only side effect found was a minimal reduction in learning and memory.

"In the case of cannabis, there is a back-and-forth in literature about brain damage," said Igor Grant, M.D., the study's senior author and director of UCSD's Center for Medicinal Cannabis Research. "We found that marijuana users were surprisingly intact."

UCSD researchers evaluated the neurocognitive abilities of 704 cannabis users and 484 nonusers. In addition to learning and memory, UCSD researchers looked at participants' simple reaction time, attention and motor and language skills.

While the studies included a wide range of marijuana users, Grant defined recreational marijuana users as those who smoke a couple of times a month to a couple of times a week.

The marijuana group was slightly more likely to have minor memory problems, said Grant, who is also a professor of psychiatry at UCSD.

It's unlikely that the problems identified in the lab would significantly affect the users in the real world, he said.

The study will be published today in the July issue of the Journal of the International Neuropsychological Society.

UCSD's Center for Medicinal Cannabis Research is a state-supported program between UCSD and UC San Francisco that oversees studies of medicinal cannabis.
Grant emphasized that only marijuana's residual effects on the brain were studied, not the short-term effects of a marijuana high.

He called the analysis' conclusions "curious."

"You would expect that a group of heavy marijuana users would have more difficulties," he said.

From a neurological standpoint, the analysis suggests that there is a fair amount of safety in short-term medicinal marijuana use, Grant said.

In 1996, California voters adopted Proposition 215, which permits the seriously ill to use marijuana for medicinal purposes. A Medical Marijuana/Cannabis Task Force was created to help advise the San Diego City Council on regulating medicinal marijuana.

"It's one more factor for policy-makers to look at and consider," said Ed Plank, a task force member. "This will be one more piece of information to help weigh the potential negative impacts versus the benefits."

The task force is searching for $35,000 in funding to begin a new medicinal marijuana program. The City Council approved the Voluntary Verification Card Program last year. It will allow people with a card to legally possess up to 1 ounce of marijuana.

Humbolt County, Marin County and the city of San Francisco have active verification card programs.

Marijuana use, however, remains against federal law.

"I don't think people should read into the results (of the study, )" Grant said. "The study was not designed to address issues of legalization of marijuana or whether it's appropriate to use recreationally."

Grant noted that there were significant limitations in the researchers' evaluation.

Complications in the individual studies, such as lingering traces of marijuana in the body and the accuracy of the subjects' self-reporting, posed problems. It was also possible that the participants in the studies used other drugs.

Despite the specific focus of the evaluation, Grant said he knows that people will interpret the study to their liking.

"I'm sure people will spin this in various ways," he said.